AGATHI TRUST
No.11/30, Perialwar Street, East Tambaram, Chennai - 600 059

# An Invaluable Experience Made Possible By Agathi Trust

May | 2026

How we learned that making the world a better place isn't so far out of reach:
A Magazine

# Table Of Contents


**1**

### Day 1

Reading session, Seedball making,
Interview with Mrs. Raeshma,
Video editing of past events

**4**

### Day 2

Trekking at Pachaimalai, Interview with Mr. Karthik,
Mrs. Krishangani, Delivery of things,
Wall painting, Eco- political discussion

**9**

### Day 3

Harvesting at an organic farm,
Visit to Chitlapakkam lake,
Compost making.

**15**

### Day 4

Palm tourism at Aminjikarai Village

**21**

### Interviews

A Honest life in Letters - Mrs Krishangani
Cultivating Awareness - Mr Karthik
The Natural way: Our Way - Mrs Raeshma

Organic farm
Mambakkam

# A Note to the reader

All of the information and details mentioned in this magazine is purely from the students' point of view. The intention is to have the reader be enganged in all of the adventures and learnings that the students, as people who volunteered to be part of this community connect, embarked on. This is purely to encourage everyone reading to take part in similar activities, not just because it is pure bliss to do so, but because there is a kind of irreplaceability in this experience that can be fulfilled by no other.

It was eye-opening in ways no one was really expecting, and brought forth a lot of capabilities and potential that people weren't aware existed within themselves. And that, too, is the point of this magazine - to help the reader realize that taking up initiatives like this and putting their intelligence and privilege to good use isn't as unreachable as one may expect.

More than anything, this is a small effort in providing confidence to people who feel alone in their hopelessness towards making this world a better place. If there's anyone that feels that way right now, this one's for you.

**KEERTHANA S**
**NEHA D**

When enough people come together, then change will come and we can achieve almost anything. So instead of looking for hope - start creating it.

- GRETA THUNBERG
(Climate and Social activist)

# The fire in within: Agathi

The Agathi as a Community, which has been operating in Tambaram since 2016, is a continuation of the great dream left by G.Nammalwar, a pioneer in organic farming. The core objective of Agathee is to sow hope for our collective future by uniting as a community among those who are stuck in metropolitan life through action. Based on the principle of thinking globally and acting locally, Agathi has taken many initiatives in the field to confront the climate change and existential crisis that we are facing in the present day.

Through organic farming, water conservation, etc., we are providing awareness about food, education, medicine, and life skills to the coming generation, especially among children, through ecological trips, hands-on experience, and lifestyle workshops. We believe that real change begins with unlearning the destructive ways we have been taught and embracing sustainable practices.

Agathi continues to serve as a platform for us to support each other in building our lives in a virtuous way.

Organic farm
Mambakkam

# DAY ONE

# Getting Started With the Program

Aminjikarai Village
Chengalpattu

AGATHI TRUST
GPS Map Camera
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India 🇮🇳
Agathiee trust, Tambaram Sanitorium W4mj+6p4, 30/11, Sriram Colony Rd, East Tambaram, Tambaram, Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600059, India
Lat 12.93288° Long 80.131813°
Wednesday, 20/05/2026 04:23 PM GMT +05:30
Google

The Community Connect Program organized by Agathi was off to a great start on the 20th of May. Everyone gathered in the centre at Tambaram, where some of the first discussions took place. Before that, though, in order to ease everybody into the program, the organizer of the whole event, Mr. Bharathi Kannan, read a story out loud — one that was both awe-inspiring and incredibly devastating.

It was a foreword written by a teacher who used to teach a girl named Ayesha in her earlier days — Ayesha, who was one of the brightest, smartest kids in her class, who didn't shy away from asking for what she wanted. This didn't come without a price, though, because asking questions was the equivalent of testing the teacher's inetllect — something that wasn't encouraged in the least — so Ayesha's hands were often filled with scars from previous encounters with such teachers who rapped at her hands if she dared question them.

This leads Ayesha to make a potion outside her chemistry lab that turned her limbs numb so she didn't feel any pain — such was the intensity of her vigour to learn new things. The story has a heartbreaking where Ayesha injects herself with the potion and dies, and consequently, becomes the reason why the teacher writes her book, one that Ayesha had requested. It is a science book written in Tamil, so every little girl like Ayesha with a thirst for learning can quench themselves of it.

It really set the tone for the whole community connect. The whole point of initiatives like this was to help and spread awareness to others of people in situations like Ayesha, and to use our voices when theirs are silenced against their will.

# ACTIVITIES of the day

As a group of about ten people, everyone split into smaller groups, with each having their own assigned work.

GPS Map Camer
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India
Agathiee trust, Tambaram Sanitorium W4mj+6p4, 30/11,
Sriram Colony Rd, East Tambaram, Tambaram, Chennai, Tam
Nadu 600059, India
Lat 12.93288° Long 80.131813°
Wednesday, 20/05/2026 12:19 PM GMT +05:30
Google

### Seed ball making

"I learned how small efforts can contribute to increasing greenery and protecting nature. Preparing seed balls was simple yet meaningful because it showed us how everyone can take part in restoring the environment. The activity also taught me patience, teamwork, and the importance of caring for the earth for future generations," R. Dimpul recalled, a truly heartfelt and remarkable takeway from the activity she was assigned.

GPS Map C
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India
Agathiee trust, Tambaram Sanitorium W4mj+6p4, 3
Sriram Colony Rd, East Tambaram, Tambaram, Ch
Nadu 600059, India
Lat 12.93288° Long 80.131813°
esday, 20/05/2026 12:49 PM GMT

While everyone was working in the centre, two volunteers, namely D. Neha and Keerthana Sriram, travlled a short distance to interview a core member of Agathi, Mrs. Raeshma. "She was a highly intelligent and self-aware individual, who spoke very clearly and eloquently," Keerthana stated. "It was an eye-opening experience to talk with her. Mostly, it surprised me how much easier is was to live without chemicals than I thought. We can use bio-enzymes, naturally occurring fragrances for just about anything! In order to encourage us, she even gave us a pack of her home-made bath powder. After using it, I've been very interested in continuing to follow her lifestyle."

**Discussions regarding interviewing Mrs. Raeshma, who has adopted a chemical-free lifestyle**

### Editing videos of past events

R. Bhavani Sri, who worked on editing the videos, commented, "Through this activity, I learned basic editing work and understood how much effort is needed to create awareness videos."

Another member on the team, Sreeya, observed, "I also helped in preparing a proposal presentation for the Agathi, which gave me insight into teamwork and how social initiatives are professionally planned and presented."

Needless to say, this was a deeply meaningful start to the community connect for everyone!

# DAY TWO
# Let's Go Trekking!

Pachamalai Hill
Tambaram

The second day of the Community Connect Program was kicked off with an early morning trek that took place in Pachaimalai Hills.

Pachaimalai is a hill behind Tambaram Sanatorium, Chennai. This hill serves as a source for Chitlapakkam Lake. Locals generally frequent this place to enjoy nature, trek, and do yoga and meditation.

We climbed around 150 steps to reach the hilltop from where we enjoyed great aerial views of the city, apart from healthy trekking and enjoying nature around, getting to know the history of the forest was an interesting opportunity.

It was both refreshing and insightful, with everyone being able to see a panoramic view of the city, which gave everyone a profound sense of peace, making the entire journey a truly memorable experience that beautifully connected nature and history.

**As Udaya S, another student part of the Connect, has so eloquently worded it,**

"The experience was both beautiful and deeply knowledgeable. During the trek, Bharathi Kannan sir shared an abundance of inspiring insights, explaining how the hill earned its name "Pachaimalai" and highlighting the unique significance of the medicinal herbs growing around the area. He walked us through the history of Tambaram and its surrounding regions, painted a vivid picture of how these once open, lush green landscapes slowly evolved into the urban spaces we see today, and emphasized the vital importance of environmental preservation."

# AFTER TREKKING

# Other Activities

**Once everyone got down from the hill after taking in the clean air and green plants, there was a food break, after which everyone scattered into different activities that sir had planned.**

**Delivering things to different people**

"On the second day, I went directly to the Agathi Centre and was involved in the delivery of ice apples to three different locations. Although I was not driving, I helped by guiding the route and ensuring that we reached the delivery locations correctly. Traveling under the hot sun gave me a practical understanding of the effort involved in outdoor work.

"This experience helped me appreciate the dedication of people who spend long hours on the road providing services to others. It also taught me the importance of teamwork, responsibility, and supporting others in completing assigned tasks successfully," Priya Vandhana reflected.

**Interviewing a renowned translator for Sahitya Akademi**

"Bharathi sir assigned separate works to all of us and myself along with two of my friends were assigned to do an interview with a famous author/translator Krishangini who was very inspiring to listen to. She also showed some of her books which were way ahead of their time," Pranay Charan stated.

Sancheta added on, "Yes. Every single one of her words made us want to hang on, made us gain so much strength. It was truly so eye-opening, and I felt blessed that there are indeed people like her who our society benefits from. And her new book, which sheds light on autism, is already in the works of being published!"

### Interviewing Mr Karthik, a natural farmer and organic shop owner

"After the trek, we went to the Agathi Centre. There, we prepared a set of interview questions for Mr. Ilanthalir Karthik, who we would be speaking to as part of our documentation work. It was interesting to sit down and actually think about what questions matter — what we really wanted to understand about his journey and his connection to Agathi," Ayden Gaitan Devotta commented.

He interviewed Mr. Ilanthalir Karthik with two others, one of whom was Neha D, who added on, "It was a wonderful experience to know about the ways of natural farming our ancestors have dwelled with; I came to know the methods that interested and made me ponder upon all the adulteration and unatural ways of foods we consume in today's world and deep desire to help change it! Mr Karthik answered all our queries patiently and helped us understand the concept of natural farming. He also delineated about his interest for natural farming and how his experience of learning it."

### Wall Painting

Shivani Shankar, who participated in the wall painting along with a few others, said, "we participated in painting a wall mural inspired by Disha Ravi, who is known for spreading awareness about environmental issues. Through this artwork, we highlighted the significance of climate action and protecting nature. This experience made me understand how creativity and art can influence people and spread important social messages."

Dhaanya N added, "This activity helped me understand how art can be used as a powerful medium to express ideas and influence society. I also learned that awareness can be created in many forms, not only through speeches or campaigns but also through creativity and teamwork."

## AFTER THE ACTIVITIES: CLOSING NOTE OF THE DAY

Everyone gathered in the centre of Agathi after finishing all the assigned tasks - it was time to leave. But in order to ease everyone out of their tiredness and exhaustion, a small discussion took place at the centre, where everyone discussed history, eco- politics, interests, and their views on the current societal structure.

Bharathi Kannan sir made it a point to create a space that was safe for everyone to voice out their thoughts, so even people who usually stayed silent spoke their minds. The talk by the end of the day helped everyone wind down and go back home in lighter spirits, so they could come back the next day with all the more energy.

Agathi Trust
Tambaram

# DAY 3

# Farms, Lakes and Compost Making

Chitlapakkam Lake
Tambaram

# HARVESTING AT AN ORGANIC FARM

Farming is one of, if not the most, important facets of society. It is the foundation of human advancement; the backbone of modern civilization. It's responsible not only for the food we eat but also for the stability of economies, the preservation of ecosystems, and the health of communities around the world. It helps sustain global populations and drives innovation in sustainability and technology.

So in order to gain some insight into what a farmer's everyday life is like, Bharathi Kannan sir assigned a group of eight people to visit a farm, whose owner is a lovely woman named Neelakrishan. With a very thorough rundown of her fields and crops, all the students got to work immediately — there were crops to be harvested before the glaring afternoon sun decided to shine!

"I helped in harvesting beans, red okra, and other crops from the farming land. This experience made me understand the effort farmers put into growing healthy food for society. Working directly in the field helped me realize the importance of agriculture and organic farming practices," Yokesh R recalled.

Karthick M S added, "Neelakrishnan ma'am explained many things about organic farming, including its process, methods, and benefits. I learned how organic farming helps in protecting the environment and maintaining good health. It was a very informative and practical learning experience."

An organic farmer is the best peacemaker today, because there is more violence, more death, more destruction, more wars, through a violent industrial agricultural system. And to shift away from that into an agriculture of peace is what organic farming is doing.

- Dr. Vandana Shiva
(Environmental activist and scholar)

GPS Map Camera
Mambakkam, Tamil Nadu, India
1180, Malandam St, Polachery, Mambakkam, Tamil Nadu 600127, India
Lat 12.839559° Long 80.179312°
Friday, 22/05/2026 09:00 AM GMT +05:30
Google

GPS Map Camera
Mambakkam, Tamil Nadu, India
1180, Malandam St, Polachery, Mambakkam, Tamil Nadu 600127, India
Lat 12.839419° Long 80.179377°
Thursday, 21/05/2026 04:37 PM GMT +05:30
Google

# VISITING

# Chitlapakkam Lake

One of the few fresh water lakes remaining in Chennai

Chitlapakkam Lake
Tambaram

GPS Map Camera
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India
No.16, 3rd Main Rd, State Bank Of India Colony,
Chitlapakkam, Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600064, India
Lat 12.934331° Long 80.138206°
Friday, 22/05/2026 08:30 AM GMT +05:30
Google

Chitlapakkam Lake
Tambaram

Why was Chitlapakkam Lake a place Bharathi Kannan sir insisted on visiting? Well, it's because before a lot of the urbanization that happened in Chennai, Chitlapakkam was an important agricultural area. The water from the lake was used for irrigation, with Pachamalai Hills (remember that?) in the neighbourhood serving as a source. The lake also attracts migratory birds and is a favourite spot for birdwatchers. But as a part of urbanization, residential layouts were planned on the lake bed; however, the locals resisted these governmental measures by means of a massive campaign (Chitlapakkam Raising Team) to protect the lake and succeeded.

In short, this is a lake that has a lot of history and resistance behind why it remains one of the few freshwater lakes in Chennai to this day.

"Listening to the stories behind the lake restoration made us realize that environmental protection is not just about cleaning spaces but also about preserving life and creating awareness among people," Dushyanth noted, recalling the trip to the lake. Kokila added on, "We learned how restoring ecosystems supports birds and biodiversity."

# AFTERNOON Activities

**In order to continue the theme of environment for the day, everyone got to work and made compost, and then delivered it to people who needed it!**

GPS Map Camera
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India
32/12, Sriram Colony Rd, East Tambaram, Tambaram,
Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600059, India
Lat 12.933032° Long 80.13187°
Friday, 22/05/2026 10:54 AM GMT +05:30
Google

Compost making

Lashman Sankar recalled, "After returning to the trust, we participated in compost-making activities. We learned the process of converting biodegradable waste into organic compost and understood its importance in reducing waste and promoting sustainable agriculture. We also helped in delivering the compost to customers along with our friends. This activity helped us understand the value of waste management and how small sustainable practices can contribute to environmental well-being.

"Overall, the day was highly educational and inspiring. It taught us the importance of perseverance, environmental responsibility, teamwork, and community involvement in creating long-term positive change."

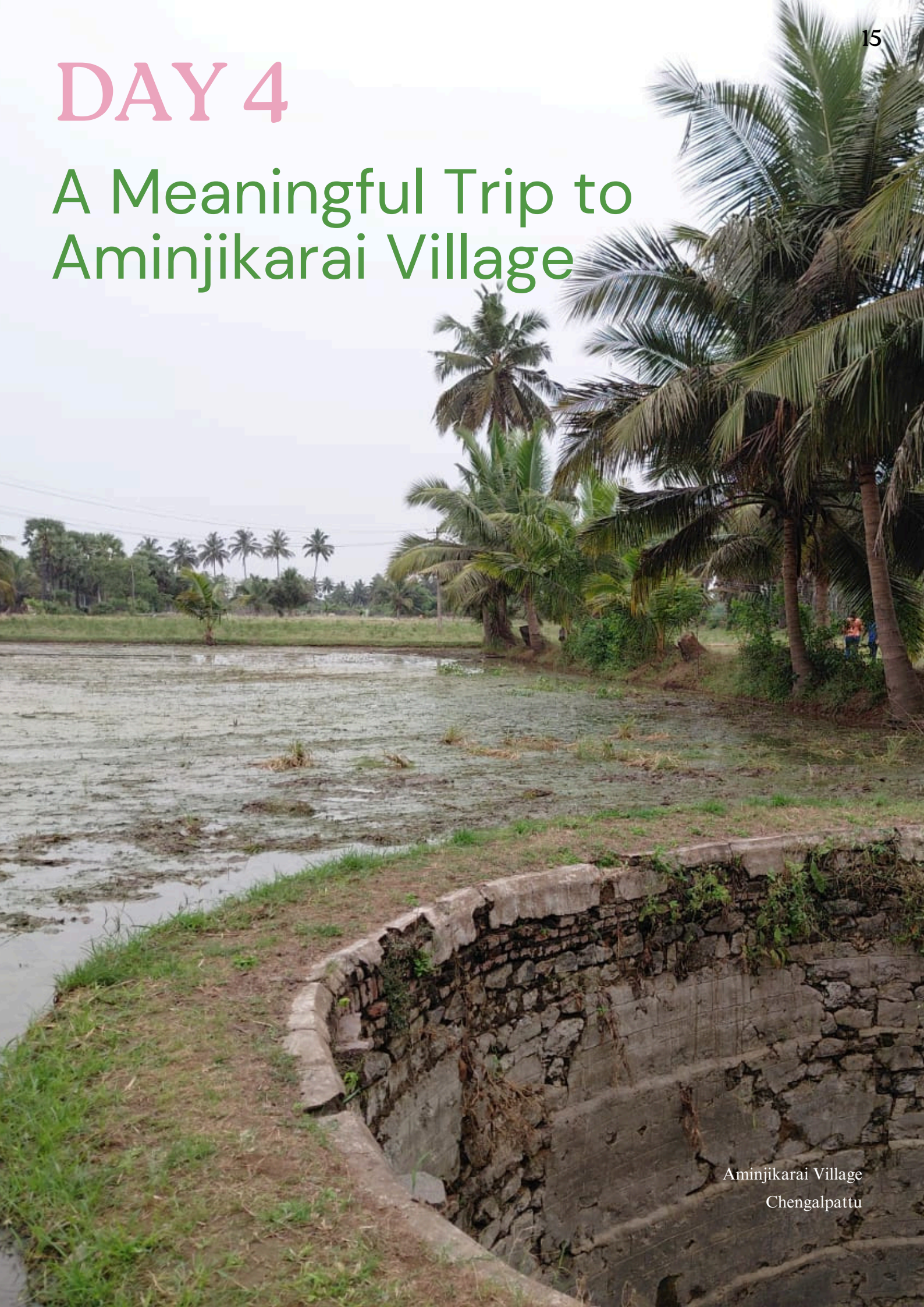
"Seeing sustainable waste management being practiced in a practical setting gave me a different perspective on environmental responsibility and community-driven work," Rohan Kotian observed.

I was assigned delivery work along with my classmate. We delivered compost to several home gardens where people were growing their own fruits, vegetables, and other food-producing plants. Traveling and completing deliveries under the hot sun was physically demanding and gave me firsthand experience of the effort involved in such work," Deviprasaad S G commented. Overall, it was an activity that taught everyone how important the environment is, as well as how strenuous the job of service workers is.

Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India
32/12, Sriram Colony Rd, East Tambaram, Tambaram
Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600059, India
Lat 12.933085° Long 80.131876°
Friday, 22/05/2026 10:55 AM GMT +05:30

# DAY 4

## A Meaningful Trip to Aminjikarai Village



Aminjikarai Village
Chengalpattu

# THE TRIP BEGINS

The fourth day of the Community Connect was an exciting one for everyone — the whole group of about twenty-one people embarked on a small journey to a village called Aminjikarai, in Chengalpattu. The journey was filled with eagerness to witness nature, know about the villagers' lifestyle, and be a part of the community by learning their lifestyles. We had the opportunity to visit the ponds, wells, farm fields, trees, and most importantly, the people of Aminjikarai.

But this is just a vague background of the place — why would Bharathi Kannan sir take everyone to a place like that? How was this integral to the Community Connect?

Well, to put it in simple words, Aminjikarai inhabits palm-tree climbers, some of the most vulnerable people in Tamil society today. To be discriminated against so harshly and to go through some of the harshest treatment by today's society for something that isn't even inherently true would not have been and easy feat — which is what sir wanted everyone to learn and experience first-hand. Not the discrimination, but the hard work that goes into climbing and harvesting hundreds of palm trees everyday, and trying to go good for the same society that has shunned them, by spreading awareness about the very palm sap that they got othered for in the first place. That palm sap has a history that is all too devastating to learn.

Aminjikarai Village
Chengalpattu

In Dushyanth's words, as he so masterfully summarized it, this is a brief run-down of the trip:
"The fourth day of our Community Connect program focused on understanding palm tree tourism and the cultural, social, and economic significance of toddy, popularly known as "kallu." This experience exposed us to a completely different perspective regarding traditional occupations and social stigma. We interacted with people involved in toddy tapping and learned about why they believe toddy should not be treated as an illegal or harmful substance.

"They explained that toddy is a traditional natural drink that has been consumed for generations and that many people are trying to spread awareness. We understood that several activists and workers are fighting hard to change public opinion and remove the negative stigma surrounding toddy consumption.

"One of the most impactful parts of the day was learning about the difficult lives of toddy tappers. We saw how physically demanding their work is, as they climb tall palm trees multiple times a day to collect toddy. The work requires immense skill, balance, strength, and courage. Despite their hard work, many of them face social discrimination, financial struggles, government restrictions, police harassment, false accusations, and demands for bribes.

"Discussions with them made us understand how traditional workers often suffer because of social prejudice and lack of proper recognition. The session also highlighted deeper societal issues such as caste discrimination and how certain communities associated with toddy tapping continue to face inequality and unfair treatment. Listening to their experiences helped us realize how social and political systems can heavily affect the lives of ordinary working people."

Truly, no one could've said it better!

# MEETING
# the palm tree climbers

"This experience helped me understand the dedication of the people involved in such work. It also increased my respect towards rural communities who continue to preserve these practices with commitment and responsibility," Bhavani stated.

"What stood out just as much as their stories was their warmth. They welcomed us without hesitation, fed us well, and made us feel completely at home. That kind of hospitality, given so freely, stayed with me. Overall, these three days gave me a lot more than I expected — not just knowledge, but a different way of looking at work, food, and the people behind things we usually take for granted," Ayden added.

"Even though many people in that community have pain in their hands and legs because of years of climbing trees, they still continue their work happily because they truly love what they do. Their dedication taught me an important life lesson — if we truly love our work, we should do it with full dedication even when difficulties come," Madhumitha stated earnestly. She went on to say, "One small boy told us that he wanted to become a collector, but at the same time he also wanted to continue climbing palm trees and continue his community's heritage. His words inspired me a lot."

# COMMENTS FROM EVERYONE about their experience

"Overall, the experience taught us empathy, respect towards rural communities, and a deeper understanding of the lives of the marginalized."

– J Kokila

"The sheer passion with which everyone spoke, including the little boy that was invited - it moved me to tears. I thought, then, that coming to this place not only gave me a valuable first-hand look at how difficult certain people have it, but it also showed me how important it is to build communities among ourselves."

– Keerthana Sriram

"What inspired me most was their incredible resilience; despite the physical hardships, they approach their heritage with pride and joy. Ultimately, the Agathi Community Connect program was a transformative experience that beautifully bridged the gap between sustainability and real-world empathy."

– Udaya S

"It improved my understanding of farming, sustainability and rural lifestyles. I learned the importance of respecting nature, supporting local communities, and appreciating the hard work behind agriculture and rural livelihoods."

– Lakshman Sankar S

"The three-day Community Connect program gave me experiences that went beyond academics. I gained knowledge about environmental conservation, social responsibility, and the importance of encouraging education and curiosity among children."

– Priya

"It was an overwhelming experience to listen to the people talk about their passion and connection to the palm trees despite the nodus thrown at them. It not only made me ponder upon the palm dwellers as a community but also about passion, enthusiasm, and love for what we pursue as a whole."

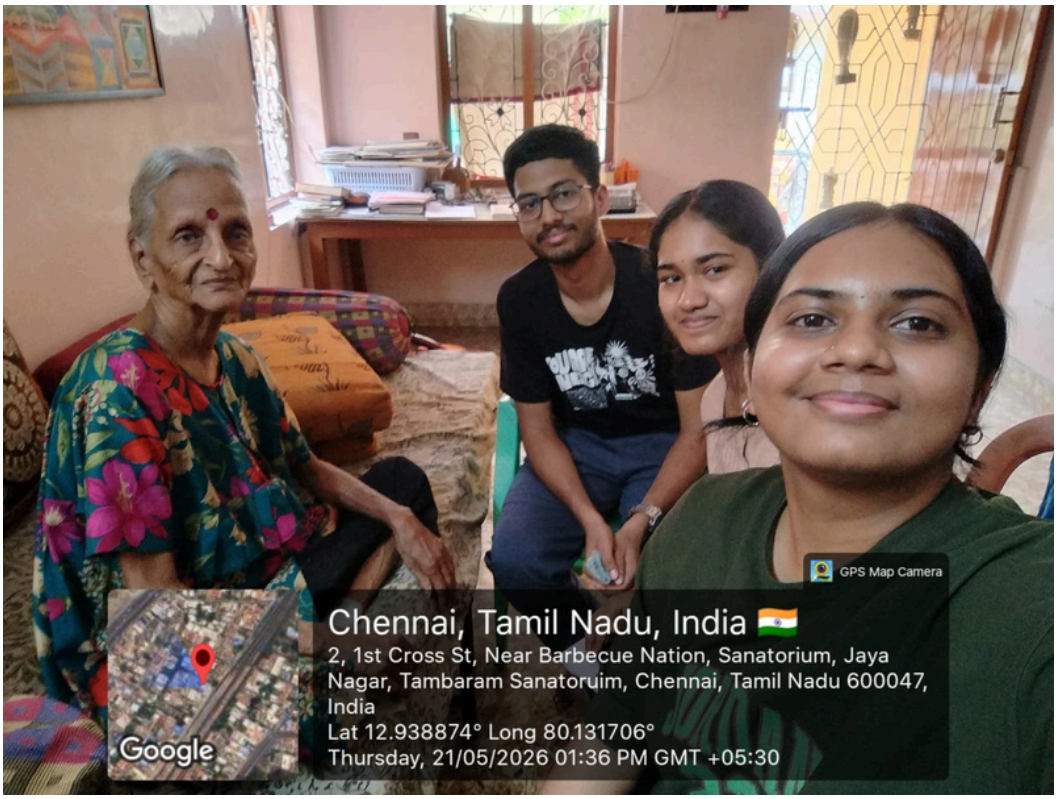
– D Neha

"Development is undeniable, but the blatant ignorance and destruction of nature for the sheer sake of progress is unacceptable. True progress must coexist with nature to make a better world for us all. After all, this world does not belong to humans alone; we share it with animals, trees, and so many other living things. Being aware, staying responsible, and holding onto the hope that things will get better is what makes it all worth it"

# AN HONEST LIFE IN LETTERS

## A Conversation with Krishangini — Veteran Tamil Translator & Writer

Agathi Trust | Field Documentation Series


GPS Map Camera
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India
2, 1st Cross St, Near Barbecue Nation, Sanatorium, Jaya Nagar, Tambaram Sanatoruim, Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600047, India
Lat 12.938874° Long 80.131706°
Thursday, 21/05/2026 01:36 PM GMT +05:30
Google

What does it mean to live a life of absolute honesty? For Krishangini , a Tamil writer, tireless translator, and keeper of marginalised voices, the answer is simple: you write the truth, you speak the truth, and you act truthfully. Nothing else will do. In a deeply candid conversation, Krishangini traces her extraordinary journey from a nine-year-old girl craving a cream biscuit to a writer whose translations have given voice to Dalit communities, autistic children's mothers, and widows long silenced by society.

### A Mother Ahead of Her Time

Every remarkable writer has a first reader, and Krishangini's was her mother, a woman of breathtaking progressiveness in an era that demanded conformity. Self-taught in Hindi simply by listening from inside her home to men studying on the front porch, her mother spent decades from 1935 to 1960 teaching Hindi to women confined within four walls: widows forbidden from dressing up or stepping outside.

> “God is not a servant you can bribe with a few coins to fix your life.”

### The Cream Biscuit Epiphany

Krishangini's father once ran a successful hotel business. Betrayal by relatives left the family destitute, with nine mouths to feed and silver vessels to sell just to survive. It was 1948. Krishangini was nine years old, and she was hungry for a cream biscuit the family could not afford. Instead of tears, she wrote a two-page story about how she might possibly get to eat one. Her brother read it, went out and bought her the biscuit, and told her that her writing beautifully reflected real life. That small, sweet moment set the course of her entire career. Writing became her language for the world.

### Challenging the Canon

Krishangini was never a passive reader. When she encountered Jayakanthan's celebrated story Agnipravesam — in which a mother pours water over her daughter to "purify" her after she has been assaulted. Krishangi found it not poignant but offensive. The mother, she argued plainly, should simply have brought her daughter inside with love. When she resumed writing seriously at around eighteen, her first major story was Pushpithal ('Coming of Age') — a direct response to another writer's treatment of puberty. Her argument was clear: it is a natural biological event, neither to be dramatised nor condem

### A Voice for the Voiceless: Translating Dalit Realities

Born into a Brahmin family, Krishangini chose to spend significant years translating Dalit literature from Hindi into Tamil. She approached the task by deliberately stripping away her own caste identity, conducting deep research to find the exact, authentic Tamil words that could carry the weight of the Dalit experience without distortion or condescension. She also translated Kasaap, a work written in the Kumaoni dialect spoken by Brahmins in the mountain regions around Nainital, a dialect and culture so specific that she consulted native Hindi speakers throughout the process to ensure every nuance was preserved.

> "I stripped away my own caste identity to find the words that truly belonged to that experience."

### Women, Autism, and the Art of Compassion

Krishangini speaks with particular passion about women trapped in abusive marriages by financial dependence and the withdrawal of parental support. Her empathy, however, extends still further. She translated the English book Let Me Hear Your Voice into Tamil, drawn to it by the stories of mothers raising autistic and mentally challenged children, often abandoned by fathers in denial, their daily struggle transcending every boundary of caste, religion, and class. This spirit of compassion runs in the family.

### Three Lessons for Aspiring Writers

When asked what she would tell young writers today, Krishangini's answer has no flourish:

— Be honest. Whether you write a love story, about a house, a street, or the world, it must be honest and truthful.

— Understand that everyone's life realities are different, and your writing must reflect that deep understanding.

— Avoid theatrics and falsehood. Writing must be grounded in the truth of human experience.

### Living in the Today

Ask Krishangini about her most memorable moment and she will gently turn the question aside. Life is impermanent, she says; she prefers to live in the today. The things that stay with her are not awards or accolades but ordinary, living presences: the stray dogs and cats she cares for each day.

She closes our conversation with quiet joy about the generation now coming of age — young people taking a serious interest in literature and honest conversation, bringing a ray of light into a world often defined by noise and negativity.

> *"I speak the truth and I act truthfully. There is nothing else but the truth."— Krishangini*

*This interview is adapted from a recorded interview by Pranay Charan C B, Sancheta Ashok, and Keerthana S from SRMIST via Agathi Trust.*

# CULTIVATING AWARENESS

## A Journey from Tech to the Soil — In conversation with Ilanthalir Karthik

Agathi Trust | Field Documentation Series

What does it take for a trained engineer, comfortable in the rhythms of the tech industry, to walk away and put his hands in the soil? For Ilanthalir Karthik — an Electronics and Communication Engineer with a decade in IT — the answer was not ambition or idealism alone. It was something far more immediate: the health of his family, and a deepening unease about what was on their plates.

Today, Karthik is one of the most grounded voices in Chennai's organic and chem-free food movement. His journey — from corporate cubicles to paddy fields is a story about what it means to truly understand where food comes from, and what it costs when we don't.

### The Spark: When Health Forces the Question

Karthik's transition didn't begin with a philosophy — it began with alarm. The rising prevalence of diseases he saw linked to pesticide-heavy agriculture made him look differently at the food his family was consuming every day. That discomfort sent him searching.

His search led him to the teachings of Nammalvar — the celebrated Tamil farmer-philosopher who advocated for indigenous seeds, natural farming, and a return to ecological agriculture — and to hands-on training at Vaanagam, a farm and learning centre built on those principles.

> "I spent three years practicing, and six months living in my native village just to understand the land."

It wasn't theoretical. He immersed himself — learning the rhythms of soil, the logic of seasons, the patience that chemical farming had made farmers forget.

### Going Against the Grain: The Social Cost of Organic

Transitioning to organic methods isn't just a technical shift — it's a social statement, and not always a welcome one. In his village, Karthik found himself the only farmer practicing without chemicals. The response from neighbours was not curiosity. It was ridicule.

The practical challenges were real and significant. He lays them out plainly:

• Yield difference: Chemical farming can produce 30–40 bags of rice per season. Organic methods, especially in the early years, may yield only 10–20 bags — a gap that is financially brutal for any farmer depending on that crop.

• Labour intensity: Organic farming demands far more human attention — managing pests through natural repellents, maintaining soil health without synthetic shortcuts, monitoring instead of spraying.

• Logistics: Getting small quantities of produce from rural Tamil Nadu to a market like Chennai adds a cost per kilogram that erodes already thin margins.

These aren't abstract challenges. They are the daily weight carried by every farmer who chooses this path — and they explain why most don't, even when they want to.

### Traditional Rice: What We Traded Away

One of the most striking areas of Karthik's knowledge is traditional rice varieties — and what their disappearance means for our bodies.

He draws a sharp contrast between what we've lost and what replaced it:

• Traditional varieties take 180 days to mature, allowing the grain to fully develop its nutritional complexity. Modern hybrid varieties have been engineered for a 90-day cycle — roughly half the time.

• Traditional stalks grow 5–6 feet tall, with deep root systems that interact richly with the soil. Modern dwarf varieties are kept at 2–3 feet to maximise yield — but at what nutritional cost?

Karthik speaks about these differences not as nostalgia but as a public health concern — the long-term effects of consuming food that was designed for speed and volume rather than nourishment.

> “Farming shouldn't  be a lonely endeavour. When I found Agathi, I found a market, but more than that, I found people who understood why this matters.”

Agathi Trust, based in Tambaram, runs what is known as the Agathi Sandhai — a community marketplace that directly connects organic and chem-free farmers with conscious urban consumers. For Karthik, this was transformative.

Through Agathi, his produce found its way to over 700 customers across Chennai. But the significance of the connection went beyond sales.

"It gave me hope," he says simply. In the isolation of being the only organic farmer in his village, knowing there was a community in the city that valued what he was doing — and that mentors like Bharathi at Agathi were building something larger — made an enormous difference.

That something larger extends to the next generation. Through Agathi's programmes, children — including Karthik's own son — have been drawn into conversations about history, social issues, and the environment. Historical tours, film festivals, community dialogues: the organisation understands that food justice is inseparable from social consciousness.

### Advice to the Next Generation

When asked what he'd say to young people interested in organic agriculture — to students, to engineers considering a similar leap — Karthik is both encouraging and pragmatic.

• Don't quit your job immediately. Start by building awareness — for your own family, your surroundings. Understand before you act.

• Support the farmers who are already doing this work. Marketing and sales are often the biggest obstacles for organic farmers. If you have resources, stability, or land, help bridge that gap.

• Find your community first. Look for Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), organic markets, and collectives like Agathi. The work is hard enough — don't do it alone.

### Closing Reflection

Ilanthalir Karthik's journey is not a romantic story about abandoning the modern world. It is something more honest — about a person who followed a question about health and ended up somewhere he hadn't expected, surrounded by people building something worth building.

Organic farming, as he practices and advocates it, is not a lifestyle choice. It is a response to a system that has quietly made us unwell — in our bodies, our communities, and our relationship to land.

Ultimately, his story serves as a reminder that meaningful change rarely starts with a grand, sweeping manifesto; it begins with the quiet determination to see things as they truly are. Karthik's trajectory from a curious individual to a community anchor suggests that reclaiming our health is inseparable from reclaiming our collective autonomy. By turning away from convenience and toward the soil, he hasn't just cultivated a farm—he has helped plant the seeds for a more resilient, deliberate way of living that honors both the individual and the ecosystem.

> "The rewards of providing pure food and building a conscious community are immeasurable. But first, you have to be willing to feel the difficulty."

*This interview is adapted from a recorded interview by Neha D, Ayden Gaitan Devotta and Rohan Kotian B V from SRMIST via Agathi Trust.*

# THE NATURAL WAY: OUR WAY

## Transitioning into a natural and chemical free lifestyle — Mrs Raeshma's journey

Agathi Trust | Field Documentation Series

Why put in more effort and make organic household necessities when you can just buy them from the supermarket next door? For Raeshma, it was more than a question; It meant the cost of her family's health and happiness.

Now she's made her life chemical-free and natural and found herself a community that believes with her that the natural way is our way in this hyper-synthetic world.

### The Onset: When she had to take the call

It all began with the thought that she should give her children a better lifestyle; Raeshma started researching harmless and chemical-free alternatives to her daily household necessities. Reading the ingredients list in foods to identifying what goes on in soap bars, detergents, shampoos, cleaning liquids, and a plethora of other utilities she found, she pondered the right things that make us question the use of it all, just for the purpose of cleaning. The irreversible damage all of these cause to the Earth, which we call home, bothered her. So she began it all by making simple bio-enzymes to use as cleaning alternatives. It gave her profound hope that there is a way for people who want to make a positive change in society and the environment.

### Support, Community, and People

Challenging the norm and pursuing a unique path can be quite difficult. She had to refine her reasoning for choosing this lifestyle to persuade others. However, over time, she discovered that it wasn't as straightforward as it seemed. It was her determination that fueled her perseverance and kept her moving forward.

> "It's not easy to change everything and everyone around simply; it might be a slow process, but I wanted it to be a successful one."

While the idea of growing our own organic vegetables may currently feel out of reach, her commitment lies in supporting others who are striving for such changes. By creating demand, we empower people to continue their valuable efforts.

She discovered Agathi Trust by chance, during a puppet show she attended with her child. What began as a small outing soon became the doorway to the support she didn't know she needed. The community welcomed her questions, eased her doubts, and helped her see that her thoughts carried truth and value. She often describes Bharathi Kanna Sir as someone who brings together people who think with heart and purpose, creating a space where hope feels possible. Today, Agathi stands in for her chosen family, and she looks back on that puppet show with deep gratitude.

One of her most cherished memories with Agathi is the 'Theatre of the Oppressed' workshop at Nammalvar Ayya's farm, Vanagam, a trip that brought her closer to the community in ways she never expected. Surrounded by people who believed in simple, honest living, she felt a sense of family that grew even stronger after the workshop. Agathi has been the spark for many gentle but powerful changes in her life, helping her see new possibilities and embrace them with confidence. To her, Agathi is not just a community—it is the force that continues to shape her life for the better.

### Bio-Enzymes: Rediscovering Simple, Natural Living

Bio-enzymes are eco-friendly, all-natural cleaning and fertilizing solutions created through the fermentation of kitchen waste (such as citrus peels), jaggery, and water. These organic liquids are biodegradable, non-toxic, and highly effective in breaking down grease, stains, and organic waste. Although they may not match the efficiency of concentrated chemical cleaners, the environmental damage caused by chemicals seeping into groundwater and oceans carries a far greater cost. Raeshma believes that as we stray from our natural roots, relying on a chemically-based lifestyle, life has made us skeptical of the effectiveness of simple, homemade alternatives.

We live under the illusion that only chemical solutions work, influenced by advertisements and societal expectations of a pristine home. However, a home should embrace its imperfections! We don't need specialized cleaners for every surface; it's time to return to our natural methods using ingredients such as salt and turmeric, which are both simple and effective.

Bio-Enzymes made using lemon peels and soap nuts

### The Lost Knowledge

Raeshma recalled discovering Frankincense in an article, which contains active compounds like boswellic acids that help reduce inflammation. Its primary benefits include alleviating osteoarthritis pain and improving mobility, minimizing asthma and respiratory symptoms, reducing gut inflammation, and providing stress relief through aromatherapy. When applied topically, it supports skin health and minimizes wrinkles. Interestingly, her research revealed that this is the very same sambrani used in Indian households. Over time, we have lost touch with these traditional methods and have grown accustomed to modern alternatives; this marks a significant loss of knowledge that we are failing to pass on to the next generation. But together as a society, returning to our roots is not a far-away utopia. By blending ancient wisdom with modern science, we can foster a deeper connection with our heritage and environment. Collaborative efforts between communities and researchers will help preserve traditional knowledge. This integration can lead to innovative and sustainable solutions for today's challenges. Ultimately, we can create a future where past wisdom becomes the foundation for new understanding and respect.

> "The shift in mindset necessary to realise and understand the chemicals present in our daily lives is a crucial step towards achieving a chemical-free and natural lifestyle."

*This interview is adapted from a recorded interview by Neha D and Keerthana S from SRMIST via Agathi Trust.*

"The Earth is our mother; whatever happens to that mother...
that will happen to us, her children,
because the Earth does not belong to man;
man belongs to the Earth."
- G. Nammalwar
(Agriculture Scientist)

# The Team

The people who made it all possible!

Mr Bharathi Kannan
Keerthana S
Neha D
Bhavani sri R
Kokila J
Priya N
Shivani V shankar
Sreeya amrithavarshini B
Dimpul R
Yokesh R
Udhaya S
Karthick M S
Madhumitha U
Pranay Charan C B
Priyavadhana K
Deviprasaad S G
Rohan Kotian B V
Aydan Gaitan Devotta
Mrethula Parthiban
Dhaanya N
Lakshman S
Dushyanth T
Sivasankaran R
Sancheta Ashok

A initiative as a part of SRMIST students and Agathi Trust